Taglines Are Fun and Effective. But There's an Art to Them

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There are some things money can't buy. One of them is brand love: The places in your heart a company can occupy aren't bought. They're earned.

Yet, as long as there's been marketing, companies have used a device known as the tagline (or slogan, strapline, motto, credo and a slew of other aliases) to hit you over the head with a repeated phrase, intended to shape your feelings about the brand.

As far back as 1250 B.C. Egypt, the pharaoh Ramesses II ordered the same phrase inscribed across monuments and temples, cementing his stature as the "strong bull." And in the millennia since, countless billions have been spent on taglines telling you "we try harder," are "like a good neighbor" or are "on your side." And if you don't know by now how much 15 minutes can save you, well, then you've been living under a rock.

Ask the average consumer how they feel about taglines, and the answer is, "I'm lovin' it." Nearly three-quarters (71%) of consumers who recall a slogan are more likely to choose that brand over competitors at purchase, and 50% of consumers say a

tagline is the most important brand element for understanding a company’s purpose – well more than name (13%) or logo (7%).

Why? Taglines are fun. We like the familiarity. Like the hook of a pop song, taglines are the memorable refrains that make our jobs as consumers a little bit easier. And not only are they more loved, brands with taglines are better understood, their ads are more effective, and they have higher top-of-mind awareness.

Even Liquid Death, a brand that proudly markets with the mantra that marketing sucks, uses a tagline: “Murder your thirst.”

Like diamonds, taglines’ impact can be forever. However, there’s a shift in the ways they’re being used.

The end of the line?

Looking at advertising alone, the use of taglines would seem to be in decline. Kantar research reports that 66% of TV ads end with one, down from 74% 10 years ago. And the number is lower (52%) when considering digital or out-of-home advertising.

There are a few reasons to explain this shift, including an increased focus on performance marketing; smaller, shorter ad units; shorter attention spans; less space to physically contain a line; and a move toward more tailored content instead of a one-size-fits-all message.

Plus, the most admired, front-of-mind brands don’t use them. If the likes of Apple, Amazon, Google, Patagonia, Spotify, Starbucks and Tesla don’t use a brand tagline in their messaging, then it can’t be necessary, right?

This introduces a paradox. Taglines still clearly work, but how to use them has grown muddier. Brand leaders are now asking more and more: Do we need one?

But that’s not the right question to be asking. At least, not at first.

First, we need to inspect what a tagline even is and if we’re defining it in the right way. The old way to define a tagline is as a fixed, oft-repeated phrase added reflexively to the end of an ad or communication. With this definition, it’s easier to make the case why they are unwieldy, unnecessary or antiquated in a modern, more personalized marketing mix.

A better approach might be to reframe the role a tagline can play: less as an advertising device, more a brand asset.

It’s time to think different about taglines

“Think Different” is a great example of the type of line we’ve lost sight of in the pursuit of performance. More than shill computers, or even define the Apple business, the line expressed a brand idea.

Apple no longer uses it in ads, but “Think Different” still guides a spirit that we feel and appreciate to this day. As with other great lines like Nike’s “Just Do It,” a tagline can be more about conveying what a brand stands for emotionally than about converting a sale.

We should no longer think of a tagline as blunt force marketing. A good tagline is an ownable shorthand for a brand’s intended meaning in the world and an efficient way to associate a brand with a big idea – but only when that’s the objective.

Airbnb used the line “Belong anywhere” to go beyond selling, embodying brand purpose along with initiatives that form deeper connections with guests and hosts. But despite its

connection to the brand ethos, it doesn’t appear on most recent ads, which play up more focused benefits like pet- and kid-friendliness. When it defines a brand’s meaning, a tagline can belong anywhere, but it doesn’t belong everywhere.

It also doesn’t have to be famous. Take a B2B brand like Cintas. Once known as “The uniform people,” the apparel maker adopted a new line, “Ready for the workday,” to communicate a far broader range of facility services, all geared toward prepping business customers to open their doors each day with ready confidence.

Will that line reach the stature of “Finger lickin’ good”? Probably not without a few extra billion in ad spend. But when a customer sees it on a delivery truck or a sales presentation, it gives a good idea of what Cintas is there to deliver in four simple words.

Still, if Apple and Airbnb have downplayed their taglines over time — and Amazon, Google, et al. don’t have one at all — they can’t be necessary, right? It’s true: They’re not for every brand. If the goal of a tagline is to associate your brand with a meaning that everyone already knows, the line might just be redundant. For brands like Disney or Patagonia that have built such consistent meaning over the years, we know what they stand for without being told.

…But for everything else, there’s taglines

If you find yours among the vast majority of brands that still have room to strengthen brand meaning across audiences, a tagline is a powerful asset. It’s no longer enough just to shout your brand idea from the rooftops; you need to live it. Boldly, proudly asserting it to the world in the form of a

tagline makes every action you take in support of that idea more salient.

A modern rulebook for taglines can help build yours into a more effective asset:

- **Make it synonymous with your big brand idea.** Does it capture the most fundamental meaning your brand strives to create in the world?
- **Own it.** Is it distinctive as a brand asset you can trademark? If it's your brand idea, it should be your line – protected in the same way you do your name and logo.
- **Ensure it's a "giving idea."** Is it expansive enough to span disparate campaigns as a red thread of brand meaning?
- **Use it where it helps.** Does it pay off the message you're trying to convey in the moment? Use it. If not, skip it. Taglines shouldn't be used reflexively, only purposefully.
- **Use it inside as much as out.** Does it belong on the HQ wall, in email signatures, on T-shirts, or anywhere else that rallies pride in employee culture?
- **Tag your experiences.** Beyond ads, where can a line bring more of your brand into key interactions, from product packaging to retail environments to app welcome screens?
- **Build from it.** Can a line do more than describe the brand, but spark its inventiveness? If "Red Bull gives you wings" catalyzed its famed Flugtag event, what will yours inspire?
- **Play the long game.** Remember, you don't have to use it always, but continually revisiting it in brand marketing will keep the line fresh along with your meaning in the world.

Taglines are there to help you say what matters most, when it matters most. When you release your brand from using a tagline in every moment, you’re free to create a line that can work harder in the most important moments. You’ll use it longer, with greater purpose and greater impact.

It won’t necessarily drive incremental sales in the near term, but it will build long-term understanding. And done right, your tagline will join your name and logo as a defining part of a more meaningful identity.

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